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COLUMBUS:

Wednesday Morning, Dec. 25, 1852.

The Queen of Spades.

There was high play one night in St. Petersburg at the quarters of Lieutenant Naroumoff, an officer in the Imperial Horse-Guards. A long winter's night had slipped away without any one being aware of it, and it was five o'clock in the morning when supper was announced. The winners sat down to it with excellent appetite, while the losers gazed vacantly upon their empty plates. By degrees, however, and the champagne lending its aid, conversation flowed, and became general.

'What have you done to night, Sourine?' inquired the master of the house of one of his friends.

'Lost, as usual,' was the reply. 'I haven't the slightest chance. I always back the color, and always lose.'

'What! haven't you put down once on the red this evening? Well, your firmness surprises me.'

'How are you, Hermann, after all this?' asked another, addressing a young officer of engineers. 'You haven't touched a card, or put down a single stake, and yet you have remained looking on till five in the morning.'

'The game interests me,' said Hermann coldly; 'but I feel no desire to risk the necessary in order to win the superfluous.'

'Hermann is a German—he is close; that's the whole secret,' cried Prince Paul Tomski; but I can tell you a person more extraordinary than he, and that is my grandmother the Countess Anna Fedotovna.'

'What about her?' demanded his friends.

'Have you never remarked,' replied Tomski, 'that she never plays?'

'A woman,' said Naroumoff, 'who is upwards of eighty years of age, and doesn't play, is certainly a phenomenon.'

'You don't know the reason?'

'No: has she any reason?'

'You shall hear. About sixty years ago my grandmother went to Paris where she was all the rage. Every one crowded to see the Muscovite Venus, as she was called. The Duke de Richelieu was violently in love with her, and my grandmother says that her severity nearly made him blow out his brains. In those days all the women played at faro. One evening, at court, she lost a large sum upon honor to the Duke of Orleans.—When she came home, my grandmother took off her patches and her hoop, and in this tragic costume went on my grandmother, to tell him of her misfortune, and ask for the money to put it right. My grandfather was a sort of steward to his wife, and stood generally in awe of her; but the sum she named frightened him from his propriety.—He flew into a passion, began at once to reckon, and prove to my grandmother that in course of six months she had spent half a million of roubles.—He told her plainly that his villages and governments of Moscow and Saratoff were not at Paris; that the money was not to be had; and finally, that she must do without it. Her indignation was excessive: she replied by a box on the ear; and from that night forward they had separate rooms. Next day she returned to the charge. For the first time in her life she condescended to reason and explain; but it was in vain that she attempted to show her husband that there are two sorts of debts—and that a prince cannot be treated like a coachmaker. Her eloquence was all thrown away: my grandfather was inflexible, and my grandmother was at her wit's end to know what to do. Luckily she remembered that she knew a man who at that time was very celebrated. This was the Comte de St. Germain, of whom many marvellous stories were told; who gave himself out for a kind of Wandering Jew—the possessor of the Elixir of Life and the Philosopher's Stone. By some he was looked upon as a charlatan, while others set him down for a spy, but whatever he was, notwithstanding his mysterious mode of life, he mixed in society, and was in reality a very amiable man. To this day my grandmother preserves a strong affection for him, and her temper is always ruffled when he is not spoken of with respect. It struck her that he might have it in his power to advance her the money of which she stood in want, and she despatched a note asking him to call upon her. St. Germain immediately came to her hotel, where he found her in despair. In two words she explained her case to him, relating her misfortune, and her husband's cruelty, and adding that she had no hope left save in his friendship and kindness.

'After a few moments' reflection, the count said, "I could easily advance you the money you require, but I know that you would never be easy until you had paid me, and I do not wish that you should extricate yourself from one embarrassment to involve yourself in another. There is another way of getting out of this difficulty—win the money back again!"

"But, my dear count," replied my grandmother, "I have already told you that I haven't another pistole left."

"There is no occasion for money," returned St. Germain; "only listen to me."

'He then whispered a secret to her which every one of you, I am sure, would give a good deal to know."

All the young officers listened attentively to Tomski, who stopped to light his pipe, and then continued—'The same evening my grandmother went to Versailles, and played at the queen's table, where the Duke of Orleans kept the bank.—She invented some excuse for not immediately acquitting herself of her debt, and then began to play. She chose three cards: she won on the first; doubled her stake on the second; doubled that again on the third; and finally carried off an immense sum, which enabled her to pay the duke, and still be a great winner."

'It was all luck!' said one of the young officers.

'What a strange story!' exclaimed Hermann.

'They were marked cards!' observed a third.

'I am not of that opinion,' gravely answered Tomski.

'The duce!' cried Naroumoff, 'you have a grandmother who knows three winning cards, and haven't yet got her to tell you which they are!"

'Ah, there's the devil of it!' replied Tomski, 'She had four sons, one of whom was my father. Three of them were determined gamblers, and neither of them could win the secret from her, though it would have done them a great deal of good, and me also. But listen to what my uncle, Count Ivan Illitch, told me—I have his word of honor for the truth of the story. Tchaplitzki—you know who I mean; he who died in extreme want after having spent millions?—well, once, when he was a very young man, he lost three hundred thousand roubles at play with Zoritch.—He was in despair. My grandmother, who was seldom indulgent to the faults of youth, made—I know not why—an exception in favor of Tchaplitzki. She gave him three cards to play, one after the other, exacting from him his word of honor never to play again in his life. Tchaplitzki promised, and then went to Zoritch, and asked for his revenge. He put fifty thousand roubles on the first card—won; and doubled his stake; and at the third coup, repeated my grandmother's luck. But there's six o'clock striking: it's time to go to bed.'

Every one emptied his glass, and the party broke up.

II.

The old Countess Anna Fedotovna was seated before a glass in her dressing-room. Three waiting-maids surrounded her: one offered a pot of rouge, another a box of black pins, a third held an enormous lace cap with flame-coloured ribbons. The countess had no longer the pretension to beauty, but she preserved all the habits of her youth, dressed in the fashion of fifty years before, and gave to her toilet all the time and ceremony bestowed upon it by a *petite maitress*, of the last century. Her *demoiselle de campagnie* sat working in the recess of a window.

'Good morning, grandmamma,' said a young officer, entering the room. 'Good morning, Mademoiselle Lise. Grandmamma, I have a request to make.'

'What is it Paul?'

'Will you allow me to present one of my friends to you, and ask you, also for an invitation for him to your ball?'

'Bring him to the ball: you can present him then. Did you go yesterday to the Princess Dolgorouski's?'

'Of course. It was delightful! We danced till daylight. Mademoiselle Eletski was charming.'

'Upon my word, my dear, you are not difficult to please. If you speak of beauty, you ought to see her grandmother, the Princess Daria Petrovna. But tell me, the Princess Daria Petrovna must be getting old, I fancy?'

'What do you mean by old?' exclaimed Tomski hastily: 'she has been dead these seven years!

The demoiselle de campagnie raised her head, and made a sign to the young officer. He then recollected that it was an understood thing always to conceal from the countess the death of any of her contemporaries. He bit his lips; but the countess did not appear to take the news of the death of her most intimate friend much to heart, for she replied, 'Dead is she? I had never heard of it. We were appointed maids of honor on the same day; and when we were presented, the empress'—— And here the old countess related for the hundredth time an anecdote of her youth.

'Paul,' said she when she had finished, 'assist me to rise. Lisanka, where is my snuff-box?' And, followed by her three *femmes de chambre*, she hobbled off behind a large screen to complete her toilet. Tomski remained tete-a-tete with the demoiselle de campagnie.

'Who is the gentleman whom you wish to present to madame?' asked Lisabeta Ivanovna, in a low voice.

'Naroumoff. Do you know him?'

'No. Is he an officer?'

'Yes.'

'In the Engineers?'

'No: in the Horse-Guards. What made you think he was in the Engineers?'

The demoiselle de campagnie smiled, but did not answer.

'Paul,' cried the countess from behind her screen, 'send me a new romance—no matter what, provided it is not in the taste of the present day.'

'What kind of one would you like, grandmamma?'

A romance in which the hero strangles neither his father nor mother, and with no drowned people in it. Nothing frightens me so much as drowned people.'

'I don't know where I can get you such a romance as you wish for. Would you like to have a Russian one?'

'What! are there such things as Russian romances? Well, send me one; don't forget it.'

'I will not fail. Adieu, grandmamma; I am in a great hurry. Adieu, Lisabeta Ivanovna. What made you suppose that Naroumoff was in the Engineers?' And with these words Prince Paul Tomski quitted the apartment.

Lisabeta Ivanovna, felt alone, resumed her tapestry-work, and seated herself again in the recess of the window. Immediately a young officer appeared in the street at the corner of one of the opposite houses. The demoiselle de compagnie blushed up to the eyes the moment she saw him; she bent her head down, and almost concealed it in her work. At that moment the countess entered full dressed.

'Lisanka,' she said, desire them to bring the carriage round; we will take a drive.' Lisabeta rose, and began to put away her tapestry.

'What is the matter?' exclaimed the old lady. 'Are you deaf? Tell them immediately to bring the carriage!'

'I am going,' replied the demoiselle de compagnie as she hastened into the ante-chamber. A servant entered bringing some books from Prince Paul.

'Many thanks,' said the countess. 'Lisanka! Lisanka! Where has she gone in such a hurry?'

'I was going to dress, madame,' she replied, returning.

'There's no time for that. Here, take the first volume of this romance, and read to me.'

The demoiselle de compagnie took the book, and read a few lines.

'Louder!' said the countess. 'What is the matter with you to-day? Are you hoarse? Stay: put that footstool nearer. That will do—go on.' Lisabeta read two or three pages, and the countess began to yawn.

'Put that stupid book down,' said she; 'it is wretched trash. Send it back to Prince Paul, with many thanks. Where on earth is this carriage? Is it never coming?'

'It is at the door,' replied Lisabeta, looking out of the window.

'Well, and you are not dressed! Must I always be kept waiting? It is perfectly unbearable.' Lisabeta ran to her chamber, but she had hardly been two minutes there before the countess rang with all her might. Her three femmes de chambre entered by one door, and a valet by another.

'Nobody hears me, it seems!' vociferated the old lady. 'Go and tell Lisabeta Ivanovna that I am waiting for her.' While she was speaking, Lisabeta entered the room in her bonnet and walking dress.

'So, Mademoiselle,' said the countess, 'you are come at last! What sort of a dress have you got on? What the meaning of this? What kind of weather is it? It is cold and windy, I think.'

'No, your excellency,' said the valet de chambre, 'it is very fine, and there is no wind.'

'You don't know what you are talking about! Open the *vasistas!*—I said so: a frightful wind, and icy cold! Let the horses be put up. Lisanka, *ma petite*, we will not go out: it was scarcely worth while to make yourself so smart.'

'What a life!' murmured the demoiselle de compagnie under her breath.

In truth Lisabeta Ivanovna was a most unfortunate person. 'It is bitter,' says Dante, 'to eat the bread of a stranger;' but of all the bread eaten on sufferance, the worst is that swallowed by the poor demoiselle de compagnie of an old lady of quality. The countess, however, was not harsh or ill-disposed, but she had all the caprices of a woman spoiled by the world. She was avaricious, proud and egotistical, as those are who have ceased to play an active part in society. Passively, however, she mixed in it, never failing to attend a single ball, where, painted to the eyes, and dressed up in the antique fashion, she sat in a corner and seemed stuck there like a scarecrow. Every one who entered made her a profound bow, and that ceremony over, thought no more about her. She received every one at her house, observing the most rigorous etiquette, but was unable to recollect the names of more than half her guests.—Her numerous servants, grown fat and lazy in her antechambers, did almost just as they pleased; and everything in the house was at rack and manger, as if death had already taken possession of it. Lisabeta Ivanovna's life was one continued torment. She made the tea, and was reproached with the pilfered sugar; she read novels to the countess, and was made responsible for all the absurdities of the authors; she accompanied the noble lady in all her drives, and the faults of the rough pavement and bad weather were visited upon her. Her very slender salary was irregularly paid, and yet she was expected to dress herself in the height of the fashion. In society her position was equally painful: every one knew who she was, and no one distinguished her. At the balls she danced, but only when a *vis-a-vis* was wanted.—The ladies called her aside when they wanted to arrange any part of their dress. Lisabeta was not devoid of pride, and felt deeply the misfortune of her position. She longed impatiently for some one who would break her chains; but the young men of fashion, prudent in the midst of their flirtations, took care not to commit themselves, though Lisabeta was ten times prettier and more amiable than hundreds of the young ladies to whom they paid their addresses. Often, when the gaiety of the countess's parties was at its height, she used to quit the luxury and *ennui* of the saloons for the retirement of her own little chamber, which contained for all its furniture only an old screen, a few patched carpet, a painted wooden bedstead, and two commonest chairs, on wept at her ease, while mirth and pleasure reigned below.

One morning, about two days after the party at Naroumoff's, Lisabeta was seated, as usual, at her work near the window, when accidentally turning her eyes towards the street, she saw a young officer of engineers standing quite still with his eyes fixed upon her. She cast her eyes down, and resumed her work attentively; but, in the course of a few minutes, again mechanically raising them, she saw the officer still in the same position. Not being in the habit of paying attention to such demonstrations, she once more went on with her work, and for two hours she never stirred. Being then called away to dinner, she was obliged to rise, and on doing so, perceived that the officer had never changed his attitude. This seemed very strange to her. When dinner was over she drew near the window with a certain feeling of emotion, but the stranger was no longer there, and she ceased to think of him.

Two days afterwards, just as she was following the countess into her carriage, she again saw him planted before the door, his face half hidden by the fur collar of his cloak, but his eyes sparkling visibly. Lisabeta felt afraid, she scarcely knew why, and seated herself, trembling, in the carriage. When she returned home, she ran to the window with a beating heart: the officer was still there, fixing upon her earnest and ardent glances. She instantly drew back, but burning with curiosity, and experiencing for the first time in her life a sentiment of a strange nature.

From that time not a day passed without the young officer coming beneath her window. A kind of mute acquaintance at last sprung up between them. While seated at her work, she felt that he was present, and every time she raised her head she looked at him more steadfastly. The officer seemed full of gratitude for this innocent favor, and with the quick glance of youth she saw that the colour mounted in his pale cheeks every time their eyes met. At the end of a week she had learned even to smile upon him.

On the occasion when Tomski asked his grandmother's permission to present one of his friends to her, the poor young girl's heart beat strongly; but when she learned that Naroumoff was in the Horse-Guards, she deeply repented having compromised her secret by making it known to one so thoughtless as Prince Paul.

Hermann was the son of a German established in Russia, who, dying, had left him a small capital. Firmly resolved to preserve his independence, he had made a resolution not to touch his income, but to live on his pay, without allowing himself the slightest indulgence. He was ambitious, but reserved, and under a calm exterior concealed violent passions and inordinate longings; but he was always master of himself, and kept aloof from the follies of his companions. Thus, though at heart a gamester, he had never touched a card, because he felt (as he said to himself) that he must not sacrifice the necessary to acquire the superfluous; and yet he passed night after night at the play-table, watching the fluctuations of the game with an anxiety as feverish as if his whole fate was involved in the result.

The anecdote of the three cards of the Comte de St. Germain had strongly impressed his imagination, and he could do nothing but think of it.—'Suppose,' said he to himself, 'I could get the old countess to tell me the three winning cards! I must get myself presented, pay my court to her, and win her confidence: but in the meantime she is eighty-seven years old, and may die this week, even to-morrow. Besides, can there be any truth in the story? No: economy, temperance, and labour—these are my three winning cards; with them I shall double my capital, and eventually increase it tenfold. It is to them I must look for independence and happiness.'

Musing in this fashion, he strolled along till he found himself before a large house in one of the principal streets of St. Petersburg. The street was filled with carriages, which passed one by one beneath an illuminated mansion, and the company who entered were the elite of the city. Hermann stopped, and seeing a watchman in his box close by, asked him whose house that was. He learned that it belonged to the Countess Anna Fedotovna.

Hermann started. The story of the three cards returned vividly to his memory; he wandered round the house, thinking of its owner, of her riches, and of her mysterious power. When he went home to bed, it was long before he could get to sleep; and when sleep at last took possession of his senses, his dreams were of the gaming-table, of cards, and piles of ducats and bank-notes. He beheld himself making *parodi* after *parodi*, always winning; filling his pockets with gold, and stuffing notes into his pocket-book. When he awoke, he sighed to find that his fantastic wealth had melted away; and to amuse himself, set out to walk through the city. He was soon opposite the house of the old countess: an invincible attraction drew him thither. He stopped, and looked up at the windows. Behind one of them he perceived the head of a young woman with fine dark hair. She was reading, he thought, or else at work. Presently she raised her head, and he saw a charming countenance with large black eyes. That moment decided his fate.

III.

It was not long after the encouragement given by her smile that Lisabeta, as she followed the footmen, who were with difficulty lifting the countess into her carriage, saw the young officer close by her side, and felt him seize her hand. Before she could recover from her surprise he was gone, leaving a note in her palm, which she hastened to conceal in her glove. During the whole of the drive she neither saw nor heard anything, answered every question at random, and was sharply rated for it by the countess. When she returned home, she flew to her chamber and took out the note. It was not sealed, and consequently it was impossible not to read it. The letter contained a thousand protestations of love. It was tender and respectful, and translated word for word from a German romance; but Lisabeta knew nothing of German, and was well enough content with it.

She was embarrassed, however, since for the first time in her life, she had a secret. To be in correspondence with a young man! The thought made her tremble. She reproached herself for her imprudence, and knew not what to do. What course should she resolve upon? Leave off working at the window, and by dint of coldness, compel the young officer to relinquished his pursuit—or send him back his letter—or write to him in a firm and decided manner? She had neither friend nor adviser, and she determined upon answering his letter.

She took up her pen, and profoundly: more than once she began a phrase, and then tore up the paper. Sometimes her style was too harsh; then it was wanting in a propor reserve. At length she succeeded in composing a few lines which satisfied her.

'I think,' she wrote, 'that your intentions are honorable, and that your would [illegible] in order to give entire satisfaction.

[illegible] opened vasistas, and threw her letter into the street, in the expectation that the young officer would not fail to pick it up. She was right; he seized it with eagerness and went into a confectioner's shop to read it. Finding nothing very discouraging at the contents, he went home tolerably well satisfied with the commencement of his love affair.

A few days afterwards, a smart young woman, with an *eveille*, came to the hotel, requesting to deliver a message to Mademoiselle Lisabeta from a *merchant de modes*. It was not without some uneasiness that she consented to see her, fearing it was some forgotten bill; but her surprise was great when, on opening the paper presented to her, she recognised the handwriting of Hermann.

'You have made a mistake, mademoiselle,' said Lisabeta: 'this letter is not for me!'

'I beg your pardon,' replied the *modiste* with a malicious smile; 'give yourself the trouble to read it!' Lisabeta glanced at the note. Hermann demanded an interview.

'Impossible!' cried she, frightened at the boldness of the request, and at the manner in which it had been sent to her. 'This letter is not meant for me.' And she tore it into a thousand pieces.

'If the letter is not for you, mademoiselle,' returned the modiste, 'why have you torn it? You should have given it back, that I might have taken it to its proper address.'

'Pray excuse me,' said Lisabeta, quite disconcerted. 'I hardly know what I am doing. Pray, bring me no more letters; and tell the person who sent you that he ought to be ashamed of resorting to such an expedient.'

But Hermann was not the man to be thus deterred. Every day Lisabeta received a fresh letter, which reached her sometimes one way, sometimes another. He no longer sent her translations from the German, but wrote under the influence of a violent passion, and spoke a language which was that of her own heart. She now received his letters willingly, and soon replied to them. Every day her answers became longer and more tender. At length she threw out of the window the following note:

'This evening there is a ball at the French ambassadors's. The countess is going, and we shall remain till two o'clock. I will tell you how you may see me in secret. As soon as the countess is gone—that is to say, about eleven o'clock—the servants will disappear. The only one left will be the porter in the vestibule, and he is almost always asleep in his large arm-chair. As soon as the clock strikes eleven, enter the hall, and ascend the staircase as quickly as you can. If you find anybody in the ante-chamber ask if the countess is at home; they will tell you that she has gone out, and in that case you must give up the attempt. But it is most probable that you will meet no one, for the countess's women are all in a distant apartment.—When you reach the ante-chamber, turn to the left, and go straight on till you come to her bedroom. There, behind a large screen, you will see two doors; the one on the right opens into an empty closet, that on the left upon a corridor, at the end of which is a narrow staircase, which leads to my room.'

Hermann stationed himself that night at his post as early as ten o'clock. It was a terrible night.—The winds were let loose, and the snow fell in heavy flakes. The lamps shed only an uncertain gleam, and the streets were quite deserted.—Though he wore only a light frock, Hermann was not sensible of the wind or the snow. At last the carriage of the countess made its appearance; and he saw two tall footmen lift the infirm spectre in their arms, and deposit her on the cushions, wrapped up in an enormous pelisse. Immediately afterwards Lisabeta leaped into the carriage, wearing a short mantle, and her head wreathed with flowers. The door was closed, and they drove off heavily over the soft snow. The lights in the windows on the first floor were soon extinguished, and silence reigned in the hotel. Hermann walked up and down; he drew near one of the lamps, and looked at his watch; it wanted twenty minutes to eleven. He planted himself against the lamp-post, and with his eyes fixed on the hands, impatiently counted the minutes which remained. Exactly as the clock struck eleven, he ascended the steps, opened the street-door, and entered the vestibule, which he found lit up. Lucklily the porter was not there. With a firm and rapid step he cleared the staircase in the twinkling of an eye, and reached the ante-chamber. There he found a footman asleep on a dirty old sofa. Hermann passed by him on tiptoe, and crossed the dining room and drawing-room, in which there were no lights; but the lamp in the ante-chamber was a sufficient guide. At last he arrived at the bed-room, where a golden lamp was burning before a cabinet filled with the images of saints. Gilded chairs and divans of faded colors, with large, soft cushions, were symmetrically arranged around the room, the walls of which were hung with china silk. Two portraits were in the room, painted by Madame Lebrun. One represented a man of about forty years of age, stout and rubicund; with a bright green coat, and a star on his breast; the other was of a handsome young woman, with an acquiline nose and blue eyes, the powdered hair drawn off the temples, and with a rose above the ear. In every corner was shepherds of Dresden china, vases of all shapes, cloaks, fans, and a thousand other feminine nicknacks. Hermann did not stay long to admire them, but passed behind the screen, which concealed a small iron bedstead, and saw the two doors—that on the right, which opened into the dark closet; the other, which led to the corridor. He opened the latter, saw the little staircase which led to the chamber of the poor demoiselle de compagnie, gazed wistfully in that direction for a moment, then shut the door, and entered the empty closet.

The time passed slowly. Silence reigned in the house, till the pendule on the chimney-piece of the bedroom struck twelve, and all was quiet as before. Hermann remained standing, leaning against a stove in which there was fire. He was perfectly calm. His heart beat with equal pulsations, like that of a man determined to brave all dangers, because he knows them to be inevitable. He heard one o'clock strike then two, and shortly afterward he could distinguish the noise of the wheels of a carriage. Then, in spite of himself, he experienced a feeling of emotion. The carriage approached quickly and stopped. Immediately there was a loud noise of servants running up and down the stairs, voices were heard, the apartments were lit up, and all at once three old femmes de chambre entered the bedroom, followed by a walking mummy, who threw herself into a large *fauteuil*. Hermann peeped through a chink. He saw Lisabeta pass close to where he was standing, and heard her quick step as she ran up the narrow staircase. At the bottom of his heart he felt something like remorse, but passed away, and his heart became again as hard as stone.

The countess began to undress before a glass.—Her waiting-maids removed her head-dress of roses, and separated her powdered peruke from her own thin white hair. The pins fell in a shower round her. Her dress of glittering silver lama was exchanged for a peignoir and a night-cap, and in this costume, more suitable to her age, Hermann thought she looked less frightful than before.

Like most very old people, the countess was tormented by wakefulness. After being undressed, her fauteuil was wheeled into a recess, and her women were dismissed. The wax-lights were extinguished, and the room was only lit by the golden lamp which burned before the holy images. The countess, shrivelled and yellow, and with hanging lips, swayed herself gently from right to left in her arm-chair. In her dull eyes might be read the absence of all thought, and seeing her rock herself thus, it might have been supposed that she did not move by any impulse of the will, but by a kind of secret mechanism.

Suddenly this deathly countenance altered its expression: the lips ceased to tremble; the eyes became animated. An unknown person stood before the countess. It was Hermann.

'Be not afraid, madame,' said he in a low voice, but carefully accentuating every word. 'For the love of God be not afraid; I intend you not the slightest harm. On the contrary, it is a favor I come to ask of you,'

The old woman gazed at him in silence, as if she did not understand him. He thought she was deaf, and putting his lips close to her ear, repeated his words. The countess still preserved silence.

'It is in your power,' continued Hermann, 'to insure the happiness of my whole life, and without its costing you anything. I know that you can tell me three cards which,—— Hermann paused.—The countess without doubt knew what he wanted, perhaps she was seeking for an answer. She spoke.

'It is all a joke—upon my word a joke!'

'No, madame,' replied Hermann in a tone of anger; 'it is not so. Remember Tchaplitzki, whom you enabled to win'—— The countess seemed affected; for an instant her features expressed a strong emotion, but soon resumed their dull impassive aspect.

'Can you not,' said Hermann, 'point out to me three winning cards?'

The countess remained silent, and he continued.

'Why should you preserve this secret? For your grandchildren? They are rich enough without that; they don't know the value of money.—Of what use would your three cards be to them? They are spendthrifts; and he who does not know how to keep his patrimony, will die of indigence had he all the knowledge of all the devils at his command. I am, on the contrary, a careful man, I know the worth of money. Your three cards will not be lost upon me. Come!'

He stopped, and tremblingly awaited her answer. The countess did not utter a word.

Hermann threw himself on his kness.

'Madame,' he cried, 'if your heart has ever known what it is to love—if you have ever heard the cry of a new-born babe—if ever a human sentiment stirred your bosom—I beseech you, by the love of a husband, of a lover, of a mother, by all that is most sacred in our existence, do not reject my prayer—reveal your secret to me? What is it? Perhaps it is connected with some terrible sin—with the loss of your eternal happiness!—Have you not made some fatal compact? Think well of it: you are very old, and cannot have long to live! I am ready to take all your sins upon myself—to be responsible for them before God! Tell me your secret! Reflect that the happiness of a man is in your hands—that not only I, but my children, even my grandchildren, will bless your memory, and venerate you like a saint.'

Still the countess did not utter a syllable.

Hermann rose.

'Accursed old woman!' he exclaimed, grinding his teeth, 'I will make you speak;' and he drew a pistol from his pocket.

At the sight of the pistol the countess for the second time betrayed a strong emotion. She shook her head more vehemently than ever, stretched out her hands as if to push the weapon aside, and then suddenly falling back, remained perfectly motionless.

'Come,' said Hermann, seizing her by the hand, 'leave off this child's play. I adjure you for the last time. Will you tell me the three cards?—yes or no?'

The countess did not answer; and Hermann now saw that she was dead!

IV.

Lisabeta Ivanovna was seated in her chamber, still in her ball dress, plunged in deep thought.—On her return home, she had hastily dismissed her maid, saying that she wanted no one to undress her, and had ascended to her apartment, fearing to find Hermann there, and hoping even not to find him. At a glance she was aware of the fact, and felt grateful for the chance which had prevented the meeting. Without thinking of changing her costume, she seated herself pensively at her table, and began to pass in review all the circumstances of a *liaison* so recently begun, and which had yet led her so far. Three weeks had scarcely passed since first she saw the young officer, and already had she written to him, and he had succeeded in obtaining her consent to a nocturnal rendezvous. All she knew of him was his name. She had received a number of letters from him, but had never once spoken to him; she did not even know the sound of his voice. Up to that evening, strangely enough, she had never heard him spoken of. At the ball, however, which she left, Prince Paul Tomski, fancying that the beautiful Princess Pauline Tscherbatoff—to whom he was paying his addresses—was coquetting with another young noble, resolved to be revenged upon her by affecting indifference; and with this notable object in view he had invited Lisabeta to join him in an interminable mazurka. He made a thousand forced jokes on her partiality for officers of engineers; and pretending to know more than he really did it happened that some of his speeches were so apt, that Lisabeta fancied her secret was discovered.

'But whom,' she asked smiling, 'do you get that from?'

'From a friend of the officer whom you know—from a very original person.'

'And what is the name of this orignal?'

'He is called Hermann.'

She did not reply, but she felt her hands and feet become as cold as ice.

'Hermann is a perfect hero of romance,' continued Tomski. 'He has the profile of Napoleon and the soul of Mephistophiles. I think he must have at least three crimes upon his conscience. But how pale you are!'

'It is nothing—only a headache. Well, and what has M. Hermann told you? Is not that his name?'

'Hermann is very angry with his friend, the officer of engineers whom you know. He says that in his place he should act differently. I suspect he has designs upon you himself, at least he appeared to listen to the confidences of his friend with a strange sort of interest.'

'Where has he seen me?'

'At church perhaps, or when you were out driving. God knows! Perhaps in your chamber while you were asleep. He is capable of anything!' At this moment three ladies advancing, according to the custom of the mazurka, to invite him to choose between *forgetfulness* and *regret*,* interrupted a conversation which was beginning greatly to excite the curiosity of Lisabeta.

The lady who had been chosen by Tomski was the Princess Pauline. During the slow evolutions of the figure an explanation took place between them; and when he returned to his partner, Tomski had forgotten all about Hermann and Lisabeta. She tried vainly to renew the conversation, but the mazurka ended, and then the old countess rose to go away.

The mysterious phrases of Tomski were nothing more than ordinary badinage, but they had made a deep impression on the heart of the poor demoiselle de compagnie. The portrait sketched by Prince Paul had appeared to suit her strikingly, and, thanks to her romantic erudition, she saw in the countenance of her adorer all that was at once full of charm and dread. While musing on what she had heard, the door suddenly opened, and Hermann entered. She started to her feet, and in a trembling voice exclaimed, 'Where have you been?'

'In the countess's bedroom!' replied Hermann hoarsely: 'I have just left it, she is dead!'

'Gracious God! what do you say?'

'And I fear,' he added, 'that I am the cause of her death!'

Lisabeta Ivanovna gazed at him all aghast, and the words of Prince Paul came back to her memory—'he has at least three crimes upon his conscience!'

Hermann seated himself near the window and told her all.

She listened with terror and shame. Thus, then, these passionate letters, these burning words, this bold, obstinate, pursuit, had, after all, not been inspired by love! It was money only that inflamed his soul! How could she, who had only a heart to offer, make him happy? Poor child! she had been the blind instrument of a robber—of the murderer of her benefactress. In the agony of her repentance she wept bitterly. Hermann gazed upon her in silence; but neither the tears of the unfortunate girl, nor her beauty, rendered more touching by her grief, could shake his iron soul. He had no remorse in thinking of the death of the countess. One sole reflection tormented him—the irreparable loss of the secret from which he had expected his fortune.

After a long silence, Lisabeta exclaimed, 'You are an assassin—a monster!'

'I did not mean to kill her,' he answered coldly; 'my pistol was not loaded.'

They remained for some time without speaking, or even looking at each other. Daylight at length broke, and Lisabeta extinguished the candle which flickered in the socket, and a pale gray light stole into the chamber! She wiped her eyes, which were drowned in tears, and turned them towards Hermann. He was still sitting beside the window, with his arms folded, and his brow knit. In this attitude he forcibly recalled the portrait of Napoleon; and the resemblance, as she remembered what Tomski had said, made her shudder.

At last she spoke. 'How,' said she, 'shall I get you away? I thought of your going by the secret staircase, but to do so you must pass through the countess's bedroom, and I am afraid'——

'Tell me only how I shall find the staircase, and I will go alone.'

She rose, searched in a drawer for a key, which she gave to Hermann, with the necessary instructions; he took her icy hand, kissed her on the forehead and left the apartment. He descended the narrow staircase, and entered the chamber of the countess. She was seated in her fauteuil, perfectly rigid; her features were not in the slightest degree contracted. He paused, and gazed at her for some time, as if to assure himself of the fearful reality; he then went into the empty closet, and feeling the tapestry, discovered a small door, which opened on a staircase, at the bottom of which he found another door, which the key in his hand readily opened. The next moment he was in the street.

V.

Three days after the fatal night, at nine o'clock in the morning, Hermann went to the convent of Procaschka, where the last offices were to be paid to the mortal remains of the Countess Anna Fedotovna. He felt no remorse, and yet he could not